Megan Smith

Wray A3 Honors English

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**Соняшники**

*(sunflowers)*

Sunlight dances over the cement sidewalks and buildings, giving an air of excitement and springtime hope to an otherwise dreary town. I pass the grocery store, painted bright blue over concrete blocks, and the smaller townhouses on the borders of my neighborhood.

I round the corner, my soft sneakers padding against the ground, old violin case bumping against my knees. The silver clasps on the case shine brightly in the afternoon sun, a stark contrast to the old, battered leather, decorated with floral stickers from my childhood.

I approach my house. Lilya, my younger sister, is playing on the steps next to the sunflower sprouts that will soon frame our doorway. Her silver jacks scatter across the sidewalk, and she deftly scoops up several of them before her ball bounces once more. She crows in victory, and I smile at her before turning the doorknob.

As I step inside, I see my mother sitting in the living room, working at her sewing machine. The machine and her set of Soviet-approved patterns are her most valued possessions as a housewife and an accomplished seamstress. She often helps out the neighbors if they need new clothes. Usually, she negotiates a trade, offering an alteration in exchange for whatever groceries we need for the week. The neighbors love her and treat her as an old friend, bringing little wrapped gifts and kissing her cheeks. She makes small talk, accepts their sewing projects. Today, she is working on someone’s brown school dress, trimming a seam and letting down the hem. A carefully wrapped box sits next to her, and a vase of fresh spring wildflowers sits on the windowsill.

“Hello!” I greet her.

She looks up, and sunlight shines upon her face, revealing smile wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. “Yeva! How was school?”   
 “It was alright. We’ve started studying for graduation exams.”   
 “Which classes will you have exams in?”

“Um… Ukrainian, history, physical education, and math.”   
 “That’s a heavy load. Are you going to have to take time off from music to study?”

“No, no, I’ll be fine, believe me.”   
 She chuckles. “Alright, just don’t come home with 1s and 2s.”   
 “Don’t worry, I’ll be absolutely fine,” I say, and she returns to her sewing. I bounce out of the room and up the stairs, skirt swishing at my sides, excited to have the afternoon off from school. I toss my bookbag onto my bed and set my violin down next to it. I open up my academic diary, scanning it for assignments. I need to memorize a poem for Ukrainian, and there’s a rumor that we will have a pop quiz in History tomorrow. Instead of feeling stress about schoolwork, I brush studying aside and click open my violin case.

Resting in the corner of the room is my music stand with a book of well-loved sheet music. I flip past the cover bearing the cyrillic letters spelling out “Melodiya”. I secretly wish that more western composers were approved by the state, but I am content as it is. I warm up with a few simple scales, and then I turn to a personal favorite, the Toccata from Stravinsky’s Violin Concerto in D Major. I lose myself in the music. It is a very enjoyable piece to play and to hear, one of the finest works of Russian Classical music. I play it over and over, refining difficult measures and challenging solos until my mother calls for dinner.

Sometime during all of my practicing, she has managed to produce enough meat and potato stuffed *pirozhki* to feed the family. I see that my father has come home from his shift at the Chernobyl plant, just twelve miles out of town. The proximity to the plant is convenient, and intentionally so; Pripyat was built especially for the families of the workers. It is unrealistically picturesque, as quotes and portraits of Lenin are on almost every public surface. To add to the shining image of the perfect Soviet community, we are going to get a new amusement park in a few weeks.

As I walk downstairs, my father greets me and Lilya with a hug. “Aahh, I’ve missed you girls so much!”

He asks about our days at school as my mother plates the *pirozhki* dumplings. Lilya proudly states that she is the best in her class at multiplication tables. “That’s very admirable, dear,” my father smiles. “And what about you, Yeva?”

“Exams are coming up,” I say. “Don’t worry, I’ve promised that I won’t let music come before studying.”

“Suuure…” Lilya says. “You should have heard her earlier.” She looks at me slyly, and I glare at her. She sticks her tongue out and giggles.

My mother changes the subject by saying to my father “I’m so glad you’ve received the promotion, Pavlo. The working hours are so much better for all of us.”   
 “I like this very much. I’ve enjoyed not having to work the graveyard shift at the plant!” he jokes, and continues in a more serious tone, “I know it’s difficult sometimes, but we’re working for a better future.”

During this exchange, Lilya turns to me to tell me all about her friends’ escapades. “Mariya and I sit next to each other this quarter. Oh, and our teacher is making us memorize a poem a week!” I shake my head, agreeing that this is an outrageous demand. “And Hanna got a parrot!”

“Hanna Mykhailivna?” I ask.

“Yeah. Why?”

“I know her sister Valentyna.” Valentyna is a girl in my class, all eyelashes, knobby knees, and smiles. Our sisters knew each other, but we had only spoken a few times.

“That’s cool.” Lilya returns to her dumplings. I finish dinner and excuse myself from the table.

I trod upstairs, rounding the corner into my room to get ready for bed. I brush my teeth, then Lilya heads up the stairs as I am walking back to my room.

“Goodnight,” she yawns.

“Goodnight.” I shut my door, and tuck myself into bed.

I sleep so deeply that I do not hear the explosion in the night.

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When I wake, I wake to a misty sunrise. Few birds sing, and the sky is clouded in the east.

It is 6 am. Just an hour before school starts. One more day before Sunday. I only have to get through the school day.

I get dressed quickly, tugging at the zipper on my uniform, grabbing the yellow messenger bag which replaced the backpack that Lilya now uses for school, and walk downstairs.

It is eerily quiet, almost dreamlike. This seems like the calm before the storm, and I am uneasy. I expect to see my mother sewing, finishing up the project she was working on yesterday. I do not expect to find her at the kitchen table, clutching a piece of paper.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“A note from your father,” she says, and I look over to see what it says.

*Had to leave early; something came up at the plant. Will call as soon as possible. Kisses.*

*--P.A.*

It seems harmless enough, but that does not dismiss the look of concern in my mother’s eyes, the tremor of fear in her voice. She worries for all of us, and especially for my father.

Her anxieties are quickly expelled from her face as Lilya bounces downstairs. She lights up the room with her youthful joy and bright grin; it is a wonder that she can be so cheerful this early in the morning. Her hair is down, blond curls unruly and luminous, and the smock on her dress is untied.

“Yeva! Will you fix my hair?” she says, and I oblige. She has the loveliest hair, it’s a shame we have to braid it away for school.

I nudge Lilya towards the door, then I glance back at my mother. Her loving smile has drained away and the worry has returned. I brush it off and walk away.

The sense of unease remains throughout the day. School goes by in a daze of tension and hushed voices. My suspicions about a pop quiz were true. I assume that I pass it, but at the moment, it doesn’t seem like it matters.

Before I know it, school is over. The final bell rings. I walk past the younger grades’ rooms, and after a peek into her classroom, it is apparent that Lilya is going to spend the afternoon playing with her friends. I walk home alone. Smoke still billows in the east, and tension hums in the air, like ozone before a thunderstorm.

When I get home, my father still has not called and my mother is worrying. We exchange looks.

“Lilya is playing with her friends today,” I say.

“Okay.”

“Are you feeling alright?”

“It’s just a headache. I’ll be fine.”

The evening passes. Lilya comes home, claiming she feels sick to her stomach, but we eat dinner quietly nonetheless. I do my homework and I play my violin absentmindedly. My father doesn’t come home, and Saturday wastes away in a sour wind of tension.

I watch the sunset from my room, leaning my pajama-clad elbows against the windowsill. Smoky, wispy clouds like chalk dust drift across the sky, and blue sky fades to yellow fades to red fades to indigo. The clouds dissipate, the stars wink into existence, and the moon appears like an old friend. I sit for a while and think.

I know that my father will be alright, but he usually spends only a day at Chernobyl, not two. He makes sure everything is okay. Sometimes, he gets called in for a few hours, to fix a mistake or supervise something. This is the longest he’s been gone for as long as I can remember. I try to reassure myself. *He’ll be okay. Somehow, he’ll be okay.*

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I enjoy sleeping late on Sundays. No school, freedom from responsibility, the opportunity to meet with friends or catch up on assignments or work on a violin piece. There is one that I have been setting aside for a while. It is another Stravinsky solo, equally famous but more difficult. I hope to use it to audition for the State Academic Symphony Orchestra someday. I can almost picture myself, playing a solo on opening night, Evengy Svetlanov conducting the orchestra behind me…

The phone rings, interrupting my thoughts. I pick it up on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Yeva? It’s Valentyna.”

“Oh yeah. Hi! What’s up?”

“Hey, umm, can you and your sister come over? Hanna needs help on an assignment, and she says your sister is doing the best in math, so…”

“Yeah! Sure! I’ll tell Lilya to bring her notebook and we’ll be there in a few.”

“Thanks!”

“Bye.” I set the phone down, look around, and call for Lilya.

“Yeah?” She comes around the corner. “What is it?”  
 “Get your school stuff. We have to go to Hanna and Valentyna’s house. C’mon,” I grab a sweater and Lilya’s coat, and as we rush out the door I yell to my mother, “We’re going out! Be back soon!”

“Where are you going?” she yells back from the living room.

“Hanna Mykhailivna needs help with her math homework. Lilya and I are just gonna go over to their place.”

“Okay, be back before five.”

I glance down at my watch. It’s 11 a.m., we’ll be fine. We step outside and walk the three blocks to the apartments where they live. I let Lilya ring the doorbell, and we walk upstairs into their apartment.

“Hey there,” Valentyna greets us. “Come on in.”

“Hanna’s in the back,” she adds as we enter the cozy apartment suite.

We watch Lilya bounce over to Hanna, watch them sit down at the kitchen table to review maths. Every so often they giggle in response to a silly thing said by the parrot, and we smile at each other.

“So...” I say.  
 “So.”

There is an awkward moment, but then she breaks the silence. “How did you think the History quiz went?”

“Oh, you know… but I’m sure I did fine. I’m sure you did well too,” I add.

“Yeah… I personally think any score is fine, but my parents care too much about the grades.”   
 “Mine too! It’s so frustrating, but I guess they only want the best for me.”

“I guess.” There is another awkward pause, but then the doorbell rings. Valentyna answers it, and opens the door for my mother.

“Hello girls. We need to go home. Now.”

“I’ll get Lilya’s stuff,” I say. “What’s going on?”

“There’s been an accident at Chernobyl,” she says. My heart plummets. “We have to evacuate.”

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After a brisk and weirdly silent walk home, we walk inside to pack up as much as we can carry. I pull out the old set of suitcases which my father used to move everything he owned to Pripyat and give the large one to my mother and the smaller one for me and Lilya.

“It’ll just be three days, so you don’t need to worry,” my mother reassures us. “We don’t have to worry.” At this point, I think she is only reassuring herself. I am still upset and I don’t think Lilya really understands what’s going on. The phone rings, and she goes downstairs to answer it.

Meanwhile, I focus on shoving all of my clothes into the bottom half of the suitcase, and then rolling up Lilya’s clothes and stuffing them into the suitcase. I fill our school bags with books, souvenirs, family mementos, Lilya’s toys. I grab my violin and the music book. I carry this load downstairs as Lilya watches. My mother is standing by the table, clutching the handset, looking like she’s seen a ghost.

“Are you okay?”

“Your father called.”

“Oh.”

She sits us down and explains that he won’t be coming home. The radiation is too dangerous, and he must stay at the plant as they try to contain the damage.

I can’t believe it. I am stunned into silence, shocked and numb. I fall apart inside as my little sister and mother start to cry.

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Hundreds of buses line up in the main town square. I remember walking past familiar neighborhoods, empty concrete monoliths of apartment buildings, and gardens of blooming flowers and flourishing vegetables.

We board the seventh bus and sit down behind a family with four blond kids. As the ancient bus putters out of Pripyat, I look behind me at the smokestacks of the plant, due east from our neighborhood. Deep inside my subconscious, I fear that this will be the last glimpse I have of my home, but we’ll only be gone for three days.

I doze off for a while, and when I wake it is evening. The bus is behind a caravan of other buses, all evenly spaced, heading south to Kiev. We are driving on a two lane asphalt road; a strip of civilization among a sea of sunflowers. I notice another bus heading towards Pripyat, rather than away, like the rest of the buses. When it passes by my window, I see that it is filled with nameless, faceless soldiers in Soviet uniforms. All of them are wearing gas masks, and I shiver.

Suddenly, from the back of the bus, I hear a horrid retching sound and a rancid stench reaches me. Someone has thrown up. The smell makes me nauseous, but my mother is more affected and she opens the window to hurl. I pass out again, thankful for the blissful unawareness of sleep.

I wake up half an hour later as the bus lurches to a stop outside the train station in Kiev. My sister wakes up too, and her complexion is ghastly. Her face is pallid and sweaty, and the crust around her mouth indicates that she, too, has vomited. My mother is covering her eyes and complains of a headache. My head aches too, and I do feel a little bit sick to my stomach, but I seem to be better off than they do.

We disembark from the bus, clambering over suitcases and trunks of personal possessions belonging to other passengers. Before we enter the train station, our belongings and clothing are examined by a guard with a Geiger counter. Its rhythmic clicks increase in tempo around my violin case and my sister’s school bag full of toys. Both are confiscated.

Every step away from my violin is painful. I keep walking forwards, tears in my eyes. The ache in my chest keeps building up.

We are lead into the atrium of the train station, where a sharply dressed woman is attempting to placate the crowd of refugees from Pripyat and Kiev.

“Please,” she says in Russian, “Remain calm. The situation is under control.”

People are shoving children to move to the front; this does not seem like things are under control. I am jostled to the side by a boy about my age. He glares at me as I attempt to regain my stature. I pull Lilya, who looks positively green, close to me.

“Hello!” says the Russian woman. “Many of you have heard, by now, of the incident at the Chernobyl power plant. Because of the imminent danger of radiation, we have evacuated the surrounding area, including Pripyat and other towns. You have been informed that you will be away from your homes for three days. However, you cannot return to your homes.” My heart clenches and it feels like the wind has been knocked from my lungs. The crowd murmurs in distress and I hug Lilya closer to me. “We are terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but officials have decided that the radiation is too dangerous for you to ever go back.”

The crowd roars, filled with shock, hate, and the desire to go home, the desire to have warm meal and the desire to be reunited with neighbors, family and friends.

I am still in shock when we are directed to a train bound for Moscow, where my sister and mother and I will be treated for radiation sickness.

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The hospital, another concrete Soviet monolith labeled with the cyrillic number 6, is bleak in every way. The ward where the victims of severe radiation sickness are staying is crowded. My sister is resting in a bed, sleeping now. Her beautiful blonde curls have started to thin. The doctors say this is a symptom of radiation poisoning, and there’s nothing we can do about it. If she recovers, they say, it will grow back. We’ve been here for a week now. I have received three blood transfusions, Lilya has received six.

Her condition is far worse than mine or my mother’s. We don’t know why, and the doctors are unsure as well. I don’t feel horrible myself, but I am really worried about her.

My sister stirs. I look over from my chair beside her bed.

“Yeva?” she asks meekly.

“What is it?”

“I’m bored.”

“Me too, *sonyashnyk*, my little sunflower. Just think about all the fun we’re gonna have once we get out of here, okay?” My mother grunts and twists in her chair. She’s been alternating between sleeping, weeping, and worrying. I feel like doing the same, but I don’t think I have the energy.

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Another week passes. My mother and I start to feel better, but Lilya only gets worse. Her hair has fallen out in chunks, her skin is now a ghostly grey, she is rarely awake, and she can barely hold down the water and orange juice the doctors give to her. I hear the doctors whispering behind the fabric dividers, they don’t think she’s gonna make it. My heart breaks. My sister, who was once so full of life, is now only a feeble shell of herself.

My fingers itch for my violin. I tap out rhythms, playing the Toccata in my head. My mother stares silently into space. I do not need to talk to her to know that if she spoke, her voice would crack and she would burst into tears.

A nurse comes over, takes Lilya’s temperature. “Are you her sister?”

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

She doesn’t reply, but she gives me a look of pity, or something not quite placeable. All of a sudden, my sister wakes with a jerk. Making a horrifying sound, she retches over the side of the bed, and my tiny sister, thin and frail, spills out what seems to be everything inside of her. The nurse rushes into action, and two doctors rush over, muttering in Russian. My mother screams when she sees that her vomit is laced with blood.

I watch as my sister dies.

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Time moves on. Lilya’s body is moved to a cemetery in Moscow, along with other bodies thought to be contaminated with radiation. She and my father rest in identical concrete coffins there. I do not get to see their corpses. Somehow, this is okay.

My mother and I hold a funeral for her. Hanna and Valentyna are there, dressed in black. I insist on having sunflowers at the ceremony.

After Lilya’s death, we spend a few weeks at the hospital in Moscow, until we receive a clean bill of health. We are both shaken up, and sit hollow-eyed in our chairs as the doctors talk to us. *Why did we survive, when Lilya and my father did not? Why me?*

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Years go by. The Soviet Union disbands, Ukraine becomes its own nation, and Pripyat becomes a tourist destination. My mother dies of a cancerous tumor. I am older now. I never made a family of my own. After the tragedy at Chernobyl, I spend less time playing my violin. I never got to play for what is now the Svetlanov Symphony Orchestra. Somehow, I don’t really mind.

I apply for a permit to visit Pripyat again. The town is now merely a shell of what it used to be, the paint has chipped, nature has made its claim, vandals and thieves have plundered everything of value within. But I need to see my home again.

I go to Pripyat the way I left it: on a bus. It jerks out of the station, bumping over a curb or two, but the drive is faster now, and more comfortable. In spite of this, the strangeness of this drive is similar. No one vomits from radiation poisoning, but the man in the seat across from mine groans from car sickness. I look out the window, and I see the fields of sunflowers facing eastward.

The sunflowers’ heads are mutilated, contorted into grotesque mockeries of what they used to be from the radiation in the soil and air.

I admire them for standing tall under the sun in spite of all that has happened, and I smile to myself.